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# BOWEN vs. ROOSEVELT

## A REJOINDER

BY WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER

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I do not reply to critics who find fault with the opinions I express in my historical writings. Every critic has a right to hold whatever opinion he chooses. But when my veracity, competence and character as a historian are impugned I feel in duty bound to take notice; and therefore I make this statement in rejoinder to Mr. Bowen's attack.

I regret to be personal, but since the personal equation is the chief element in this discussion, I can not avoid it. Twenty years ago Mr. Herbert W. Bowen was Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States to Venezuela. I give his title in full because he is a stickler in such matters, and reproves me for not listing the names of all the countries with which as Commissioner he had dealings. It happened that during his term of service Germany, wishing to see whether our Government would really back up the Monroe Doctrine, persuaded England and Italy to join her in sending warships to Venezuelan waters, to collect from Venezuela debts long overdue. Theodore Roosevelt was then President of the United States, and John Hay was Secretary of State. These European Powers kept up, for a while, what they called a "pacific blockade," but when Mr. Hay pointed out to them that there could be no such thing as a pacific blockade, they declared a state of belligerency. The German Kaiser's motive was to land German troops at one of the ports and occupy it. Once there, he knew that it would be difficult to dislodge him. The Venezuelan Government meanwhile, much perturbed, requested Mr. Bowen to act as their diplomatic agent, and to mediate between them and Germany. President Roosevelt consented to his doing this. Mr. Bowen objects to my mentioning Mr. Roosevelt's consent at all, and seems to imply that he (Bowen) acted on his own motion. It is safe to say, however, that if the President and Secretary of State had not approved any Minister's act, that Minister's resignation would have been demanded.

Mr. Bowen seems to have acted with industry in negotiating for the Venezuelans with the hostile Powers; but he admits, in the foregoing communication, that he was forced to appeal to Mr. Hay to back up the request of Mr. Mediator Bowen, and in order to be near the great diplomatic engine of the American State Department, he went to Washington himself. England and Italy, who had not the Kaiser's reptilian motive for pressing the Venezuelans, agreed to

arbitration, and presently the Kaiser also announced his willingness to arbitrate. Mr. Bowen naturally supposed that the achievement was his, and he has taken great pride ever since in that supposition. Indeed, he has been over-sensitive at the way in which the neglectful world has failed to do him justice. The affair was duly recorded, with Mr. Hay's telegrams and others, in the Red Book of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

When I was preparing my *Life of John Hay*, five years ago, I consulted those of Mr. Hay's former colleagues and friends who seemed likely to be best informed as to his public career. Among others I saw President Roosevelt, and he told me the true story of thwarting the German Kaiser in Venezuela. I urged him to let me print it in the *Life of Hay*. He demurred for several weeks, but finally consented when I assured him that any such evidence of German duplicity and evil plotting against the United States could not fail to help the American patriotic cause at that time—1915. Finally he sent me the account which I printed in my book. In substance it states that President Roosevelt, tiring of the fruitless diplomatic shilly-shallying of the Germans, told Holleben, the German Ambassador, to cable to the Kaiser that unless the Kaiser arbitrated, he would order Admiral Dewey, with a fleet of forty-five ships, to the coast of Venezuela, to put his ships between the German ships and the Venezuelan ports, which they threatened to bombard. When Holleben returned to the White House a week later, and reported that Berlin had sent no reply, Roosevelt told him that he would order Admiral Dewey to Venezuela sooner than he had first planned, but that if the Kaiser consented to arbitrate, Roosevelt would not let it be known, at that time, that he had forced the Kaiser to take this step, but that he would publicly praise the Kaiser as a friend of arbitration. Only Roosevelt and Holleben knew of this affair, so that it might be kept secret. Within thirty-six hours Holleben hurried back to the White House to assure Roosevelt that the Kaiser would arbitrate.

From this it appears that President Roosevelt, and not Mr. Bowen, brought the Kaiser to terms over the Venezuelan dispute in 1902-03. To have had his chief cause for fame snatched away from him thus ruthlessly, was naturally very bitter to Mr. Bowen. I knew nothing about his feelings when I published Hay's *Life*, but it is perfectly plain now why he has incessantly abused me by private letters and through the press ever since. I have learned that he had other grievances against President Roosevelt, but these would not account for his attitude towards me.

Now, the impartial reader may say: "Very good, but what if Roosevelt made up the whole story?" Fortunately, to allay such a doubt, various pieces of circumstantial evidence are at hand to confirm the truth of Roosevelt's statements. A German of whom Holleben sought advice after he had just heard Roosevelt's second warning, told this to a thoroughly upright American. Admiral Dewey, shortly before his death, said, in a public letter, that he held his fleet at its rendezvous in the Caribbean ready to steam at a moment's order to the Venezuelan ports. A very distinguished American diplomat, with whom I talked the matter over, said: "That explains it! I was always puzzled to know why Roosevelt praised the Kaiser as a lover

of arbitration." If we examine more minutely, we should find that the dates correspond with Roosevelt's statements.

Why did he not inform Secretary Hay or Mr. Bowen? Because he had promised the Kaiser, through Holleben, that the matter should be secret. Finally, this method of cutting a diplomatic knot was peculiarly Rooseveltian. He practised it in the case of Alaska; in the case of Colombia, and in others. It was his own personal representation to the Czar of Russia and the Emperor of Japan that caused the armistice which put an end to the Russo-Japanese War. And I could cite other cases in which Roosevelt did not whisper to Secretary Hay what he was doing..

So I feel that, as a historian who wishes to tell the truth, I am fully warranted in accepting President Roosevelt's statement. I regret that the statement robs Mr. Bowen of a just claim to the glory which was so dear to him. I regret also that he holds so mean an opinion of me and my works, but the truth must prevail.

President Roosevelt wrote, over his own signature, a complete account of the episode, which appeared in 1916 in the sixteenth and later impressions of my *Life of John Hay*. It is noteworthy that if the statement was not true, Bernstorff and the Germans, who at that time did their will in this country, made no denial.

WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.